

The Rescue

By Brantley Thompson Elkins

With edits by Shadar and Velvet

I

Finding a beautiful woman in his shower should have made his day. But he didn't have any day left to make, not after being put on a terrorist list, losing his job and spending the trip home wondering how he was going to pay the rent.

"We can't tell you why," his boss Tyler "Truck" Reynolds had told him. "It comes straight from the top."

Jeffrey Floyd Taylor didn't work for the government. Neither did his company, as far as he knew: Chabon Technologies produced medical devices. They involved patents and a few trade secrets, but hardly state secrets. But you'd never have guessed that from what had happened today.

They hadn't let him go back to his office, let alone clean out his desk. They wouldn't even tell him whether he'd be getting severance pay and accrued vacation. A couple of security guards had practically frog-marched him to the elevator, down to the lobby and out the door.

"Have a nice day," one of the guards called after him.

Was that how it had gone down when the Mets fired Willie Randolph? A cliché for every occasion, like the waiter at the restaurant wanting to know if you were still "working on" your food? But at least Willie knew why he'd gotten the boot.

When he heard the shower running, his first thought was: *Christ, did I really leave it on this morning? The water bill's going to be out of sight!* When he heard someone singing in the shower, his second thought was: *Did they tip off the landlord? Have I been evicted already?*

It was paranoid, he knew; you had to be months in arrears for that, and all his rent checks had cleared. Anyway, his key still worked or he wouldn't be in here. But Jeff was feeling paranoid just the same. Hearing a woman singing in the shower didn't help.

*"I'm singin' in the rain,
Just singin' in the rain
What a glorious feelin'
I'm happy again
So dark up above
The sun's in my heart
And I'm ready for love."*

By the time she'd finished he'd gotten to the bathroom and pulled the shower curtain aside. What he saw left him speechless. She was gorgeous. Jeff hadn't expected that. She was wearing some ridiculous costume she must have picked up at Party City. Jeff never *could* have expected that. Who the hell wears clothes in the shower?



“Are you ready for love?” she cooed.

Jeff was still speechless, not only from the embarrassment of seeing how the soaked costume clung to her curves, but from fear that he was being set up somehow; that the people at Chabon weren't through with him yet.

“Who the hell are you?”

“Your going away present. Some of the guys felt bad about how things went down and chipped in to--”

“*What* guys?”

“You know, Larry and Curly and...”

Seeing his reaction, she put her finger to her lips, then leaned over and whispered:

“Just go along with the gag. Place is bugged.”

Could she actually be on his side? Could anybody?

“So they chipped in and...”

“They said you'd broken up with your girlfriend,” she said. “Nobody to come home to.” And in a whisper: “*We have to make this look good.*”

“Must have really set them back,” Jeff commented.

“They'd been ordered to have no further contact. They can't even complain out loud about you getting a raw deal. Anyway, one of them was a comics fan. That's where they got the idea for this outfit. Power Girl, you know.”

“I never read the comics.”

“Too bad. Well, it's coming off anyway.”

She began peeling off the costume, as casually as if they were long-time lovers.

Jeff's jaw almost dropped in disbelief. Her body was *too* perfect, as if it had been airbrushed like the centerfold spreads in *Playboy*. Her skin practically glowed. Her arms and legs were like those of a ballet dancer. Her breasts were round and didn't sag the slightest fraction of an inch. Her belly was taut, and her hairless pussy a vision of perfect symmetry.

Christ, he thought. *Even Eliot Spitzer didn't rate this.*

As she dried herself off with one of his towels, the woman teased him unmercifully, revealing and concealing and then again revealing her magnificent breasts and perfect

pussy – all the while looking him up and down. Especially down, where his cock rose as if it had a mind of its own.

“Is that a Ball Park frank in your pants?” the woman cooed. “Or are you just glad to see me?”

Jeff blushed.

“You have to undress too, you know,” she added. She kissed him on the lips, then whispered in his ear.

“We have to make this sound good, too. Trust me.”

Something strange was going on here, but Jeff wasn't going to look a gift goddess in the... As he fumbled with his clothes, she headed to the living room.

Why not the bedroom? he wondered. Then he saw the overnight bag shoved under the coffee table. Stood to reason she'd have a change of clothes; she couldn't have come into the building wearing that Power Girl outfit or whatever it was. Only...

His door had still been locked when he arrived. How *had* she gotten in to the building?

Before Jeff could ponder that, as he fumbled with his T-shirt and briefs, the woman returned to the hallway. It was hard to think straight, with his aching cock demanding his attention. Now she was wearing a gold necklace with an emerald pendant.

Curiouser and curiouser.

“From a very grateful client?” he ventured, in part to cover his anxiety, as he stood naked, and rampant, before her – an ordinary looking guy, he knew. His ex-girlfriend thought he was the Dilbert type. He didn't know what she meant by that, apart from the fact that he spent his days in a cubicle working on programs for medical devices.

“You might say that,” the woman – hell, the *goddess* – replied. And then she saluted him.

Jeff stared blankly at her for a second.

“Well, you're saluting *me*.”

Oh God, oh God, oh God...

Things got really crazy then. One moment she was a few feet away, the next they were on the rug together; she was on him and he was *in* her, her cunt caressing his cock like a velvet glove. It was too much; he tried to keep himself from coming but couldn't.

Yet even as he erupted, she screamed with pleasure, as if he were some super-stud in a porn movie with an indefatigable cock. She couldn't be faking it, either; he could feel her spasms.

"Oh God!" he cried, joy overcoming disbelief. It had been so long... and things had been going downhill with Joan even before she left him. Only now... he still felt himself inside this love goddess, his cock still hard, but content for the moment to luxuriate in its surroundings. The air was filled with the most delightful aroma, which could be coming from nowhere but her.

The goddess was looking down at him now from a seated position, a smile on her face, her eyes rapt. Her necklace hung before her incredible breasts, the pendant swinging hypnotically as she disported herself. So round, so firm, the nipples erect like bullets...

"Seeing is believing," she said, reading his thoughts. "But feeling is even better."

Jeff cupped them with his hands, feeling the nipples against his palms. The goddess placed her hands over his, making him squeeze them harder. They were like nothing he'd ever felt before, satiny smooth and firm beyond belief – he could barely make a dent in them. Yet her moans testified that he was pleasuring them.

She ground against him, squeezing his cock so tight that he couldn't come again, but he didn't want to – not yet. And then she had another surprise for him.

"Can you carry me to the bedroom without popping out?" she cooed.

It sounded like an impossible task, and yet... Either he was stronger than he had imagined, despite getting no more regular exercise than walking, or she was somehow lighter than she appeared. As he sat up, she wrapped her legs around him, and helped him to his feet. It was awkward; he was afraid of losing his balance. Yet she seemed to know how to help him, and the bedroom wasn't that far.

Jeff laid her gently on the bed, but that was the last gentle thing he did,

"Fuck me!" she shouted. "Don't hold back!"

Nothing like his ex, who'd liked it slow and steady – when she'd liked it at all.

So hot, so tight, so slick. The bed creaked and groaned as he slammed his cock into her again and again, as she thrust against him and pressed her hands against his ass to draw him in deeper. The flowery aroma from her cunt grew thicker and thicker; his mind was reeling. All thought ceased; all judgment fled; he was conscious only of his cock and

her cunt. And then he was coming, and coming, and coming; he knew they must both be screaming, but he was too caught up in the wonder of it to pay attention – the wonder of exploding inside her again and again.

Was it only minutes, or hours? Jeff couldn't quite tell. But at some point his passion was at last spent. He felt exhausted and yet fulfilled, fulfilled as never before. They were still together in bed, facing each other. She kissed him on the lips, and whispered.

“We've got to be going now. They must have gotten suspicious to send in the hired guns.”

Hired guns?

“They're right outside the door. Awaiting orders. Come.”

Somebody wants to kill me? But how the hell are we going to get out of here?

In the afterglow of the best sex of his life, but now with a threat to his life, Jeff had gone in a moment from being utterly contented to being scared shitless.

But he let her take his hand, and she led him to... *the balcony?* She took off her necklace, threw it over the railing. Then she clasped her arms around him, and took off.

Right into the air.

Jeff was terrified. Behind them, he could hear the sound of his apartment door being smashed in, but that sound quickly faded as the goddess, holding him tightly, soared into the heavens.

II

It was past nightfall when they approached to their destination. Jeff didn't have any idea where that was. He only knew that he was naked and afraid. The fact that he was being held tight by a naked goddess didn't seem to matter any more.

He'd kept his eyes closed for a while, but that hadn't helped – it only made him feel more disoriented. When he opened them, all he could see past her head was blue sky and clouds. He avoided looking down as much he could; and whenever he did he couldn't see anything but the thin lines and curves of roads and streams, the patterns of small towns and farms. They seemed to be avoiding centers of population.

At a guess, they were going about 60 miles an hour; the wind against his body felt about like that on his arm if he hung it out the window on the turnpike. But the force of the air varied a bit in strength; there seemed to be interference patterns between natural

winds and the artificial one they were creating. When they flew through a small cloud, the tiny droplets felt like a needle shower, but that was followed by a blow dry.

They hadn't encountered any heavy weather, which was fine with him; he didn't want to think about being hit by lightning. The flying woman also seemed to know how to steer clear of air traffic: terrific distance vision, he guessed. Maybe she even had some sort of biological radar, like bats.

If the night and her body hadn't been so warm, he might have caught a chill. As it was, her warmth was about the only thing that felt comfortable – that and the fact that it was easier to draw breath in the lee behind her when there wasn't a cross-current; she was cradling him so that they were neck-to-neck but facing opposite ways. Other than that, it was a bit like taking a long walk on a stormy day, except that he didn't have to worry about being blown off his feet. Or blown out of her arms; her grip never wavered. But it was awkward as hell, and he was going to ache like hell.

There had to be a reason for all this, even if he didn't have any idea what it was. Jeff had tried to question her at first, but she had gone strangely silent. "It's all right," she'd said. "You're safe with me." Only she wouldn't tell him where they were going, or why, or how long it would take.

Although he wasn't sure of their direction, he thought it must be southwest, because the sun was setting to the right of their apparent course, but if the flying woman had been headed due south they'd have been over the Atlantic by now. Although he couldn't keep track of time, he knew that they must have been in the air for several hours for the sun to have neared the horizon.

Once dusk fell, Jeff tried to get some sleep, but that was impossible. So he watched the moon and the stars whenever they were flying in clear air. He could make out the Big Dipper and the North Star. But was that red star Betelgeuse or Mars? Mars had been in opposition last Christmas, he remembered, and the Phoenix lander had found water just a month ago. He'd had a telescope when he was a kid, but those were obsolete now – at least for studying nearby planets.

Could this woman fly all the way to Mars? Not if she needed to breathe, that was for sure. What *was* she, anyway? Some visitor from a strange planet, or did she come out of a super-secret lab somewhere on Earth? Was she really even alive, or just a sophisticated

robot programmed to mimic humans? Maybe a super sex toy, except for the flying part. Or some sort of secret weapon: search, seduce and destroy. Any and all of these ideas he'd have dismissed as paranoid fantasies yesterday.

It was only when he could sense that they were slowing, that the wind no longer blew so strongly against him, that he knew he was close to journey's end. They dropped through the moonlit cloud cover; he could feel the droplets against them, and they were slower to evaporate at their reduced speed. Then he could see lights below: a small town and its streets, stores and homes.

But as they descended lower, they passed over the most populated areas, and he could make out nothing but the occasional lights of what he supposed were farms. It was pitch dark out; Jeff couldn't see where the flying woman was headed. But she seemed to be right on target as they came for a landing. *She must have terrific night vision*, he thought.

The target turned out to be a small cabin, evidently long-abandoned; even in the dim light he could see that the roof had caved in and some of the slats were missing. That was about all he could make out until the woman disappeared inside and came out with an emergency lantern and a bundle.

"Our clothes," she explained, undoing the bundle. In the lantern light, her naked body took on a dream-like quality, and he found himself responding to her again, never mind that his legs were rubbery and his body ached and he had a crick in his neck; never mind, either, that "she" might be an "it." Since he too was naked, she couldn't miss it.

"No more loving tonight," she said. "Sorry about that. Anyway, the hand-off's going to be in ten minutes, so we'd better look presentable."

"Right," Jeff said, swallowing his pain and disappointment – he felt a twinge of shame about the latter -- and wallowing in confusion. "But maybe you could at least explain..."

It was as if she wasn't even listening. She was already donning her outfit – panties and bra (not that she needed the latter), jeans and belt, a blouse, athletic socks and loafers. Jeff had drawn pretty much the same sort of thing, except for the underwear – boxers, not briefs. Somehow he managed to get his own clothes on without falling down, and without asking for help despite the stiffness of his arms.

"Don't act surprised by anything you hear," the woman advised him. "We can trust these

guys, but they don't have clearance about certain matters – including myself. They have their own ideas about how we got here. And your arrangements were made at the top; they didn't have time to fully brief me. We were in kind of a bind.”

“But--” Jeff ventured.

“I'll say no more,” the woman warned him.

“You haven't said *anything* yet.”

She ignored that, and he fell silent. In a few minutes, he could make out flashlights approaching. Then a couple of men behind them. They looked like weekend warriors, which, for all he knew, they were. One seemed to be in charge; at least, he did all the talking.

“You really know how to put on the miles,” he told the woman, who only nodded.

“You must be Jeff,” he said as he turned his attention to business. “I'm Mutt.”

Jeff gave him a blank look.

“Guess you aren't up on popular culture history, huh?”

Mutt's companion handed him a package, which he in turn offered to Jeff. “It's got everything you're going to need – wallet, credit card, driver's license, Social Security card, insurance, plus some folding cash. Don't worry, we've set up an electronic trail as well as a paper trail. It'll pass muster as long as nobody looks at it too closely, and nobody's going to be looking for Adam Stone – we were real careful about that. Nobody's going to be looking for Liz Stone, either, so you and your wife have nothing to worry about.”

Wife? But this had to be part of the game, so he went along with it: “That's what *was* worrying me,” he managed to say. “I'm glad to know you guys are thorough.”

“When you work for the agency, you have to be. Though there's such a thing as being *too* thorough. I don't know why we're playing by Moscow Rules here in America, but I get paid to do what I'm told. Anyway, you'll be seeing her soon. Just not here. She caught the flight before yours. We've picked a really secure location, and we have people stationed there. They'll update you on the situation and debrief you. We want to get the people behind this whole thing, you can count on that.”

“Right,” Jeff responded, unable to think of anything better.

“We've got a car waiting out by the road,” Mutt said. “Not far from there to the private airport. We'll have you to Pigeon Forge in a couple of hours. Dawn did a real good job getting you here, but it's our show now.”

Dawn? As for Pigeon Forge, it sounded vaguely familiar, but Jeff couldn't place it.

Before he could think of something to say, Mutt was saying his farewell to Dawn.

"Been nice meeting you," he said. "But I still can't figure out how you got here so fast."

"I'm afraid you'll have to keep wondering," she parried. "Anyway, I have to take off in a little while. You know how it is in this business; when it rains, it pours."

"Don't I know it! Well, we've all got our little secrets. Whatever gets the job done."

With that, he waved for Jeff to follow him, and they made their way through the woods and then a field to a car parked on a country road. Nothing flashy, just a Subaru four-door. Mutt took the wheel, and they drove for about an hour to a rural airport – the kind crop-dusters used, Jeff supposed.

The plane was waiting. It was a four-seater, not counting the pilot. It was really late when they took off. Really, *really* late. Tired as he was, and without the distraction of the flying woman or the rushing air, he was able to get some sleep this time.

* * *

It was only the jolt of the landing that woke Jeff up. He felt groggy, as if hadn't gotten any sleep at all. He must have had a nightmare, he thought. That would do it. Sometimes he remembered his dreams, including the nightmares. Usually, he didn't. This time, there were vague flashes of falling through darkness, unable to see, but somehow being aware that the ground was very near.

But he was on the ground now, no harm done. Sleep must have done him some good; his aches and pains were a lot more tolerable down.

There was a faint glimmer in what he took to be the East, past the control tower and a squat concrete building that must pass for a terminal. As they taxied towards it, he could make out "Aviation Center" and then "Gatlinburg-Pigeon Forge."

"You'll be wanting some coffee," Mutt said. It was the first thing he'd heard since they landed. "You'll be having breakfast with Liz at the shack."

Whatever the shack was.

They never made it all the way to the terminal, if that's what it was. The plane came to a stop well short of it, where they were met by another car – a beat-up old Ford that looked as

if it must have once belonged to a hillbilly. Jeff saw that it had Tennessee plates, so maybe it had.

“Get this guy some coffee,” Mutt told the driver. “He’s had a long night.”

So Mutt and his companion were leaving. Another hand-off. The driver said nothing, but trotted over to the building for a minute and trotted back with a cup of something black, most likely from a vending machine. It tasted vaguely like coffee; Jeff wasn’t about to be particular at this point.

The light was getting brighter as they pulled out of the airport onto a highway that was lined with hotels and tourist traps promising everything from a Jurassic Park boat ride to live bears. It all clicked only when he saw signs for the turnoff to Dollywood and Splash Country USA. But they didn’t take that turnoff; instead they hung a right onto a road that headed into the hills. The tourist trap strip ran only a block in from the main drag, it seemed.

The sun had risen as they made their way up the winding road. The air was clear and bright. Several miles had gone by; no sign of any motels or other lodging. Then the driver turned onto a rutted dirt road that led to a rustic dwelling. Not exactly a shack, but it looked humble and in bad need of a paint job.

A woman stepped through the front door and onto the porch. She must have heard the car coming.

“That’s Liz,” the driver said, breaking his long silence. “She’ll explain everything.”

Whatever everything was.

As they approached, Jeff could see that she definitely wasn’t dressed for breakfast.



III

“Well, don’t stand there gawking,” the woman on the porch said. “Come on in.”

Jeff just stood there as he heard the car pull away,

“What?” he finally got out. “Why?”

“So people will think I’m stupid. It pays to make the opposition underestimate you. I’ve got a Daisy Mae outfit, too, but that wouldn’t have the same effect. Of course, I also like to tease Sorrowful Jones. The driver. He really thinks he’ll get a piece of me one of these days.”

“They said at the last stop you’d be playing my wife.”

“That’s what they were told. Ever wonder why the agencies you read about or see about on TV never seem to be on the same page? It’s deliberate. As long as nobody knows the whole story, nobody can leak the whole story... anyway, time’s a wasting, so you’d better come on in.”

Jeff followed her, making the steps to the porch even though his legs protested, and then through the front door.

The place was dimly lit and rattily furnished – springs coming out of the couch, for Christ’s sake. Liz or Daisy Mae or whoever she was led him around a corner and down a short hallway. At the end was another seemingly ordinary door that looked to have taken a lot of abuse. But instead of reaching for the handle, she fiddled with a cuckoo clock on a nearby shelf. Suddenly the door opened. The room behind it was brightly lit, and filled with some high-tech equipment. A couple of geeks were manning computer terminals doing... well, whatever geeks did in this place, whatever this place was.

“Adam, meet Tweedledum and Tweedledee – those are the only names you’re going to get. They already know your real name, but then they have to work this case.”

“Impressive place,” Jeff remarked.

“We’ve totally perfected the art of hiding in plain sight,” said Tweedledum. “Nobody’s going to look for a command post here.”

“One guy stumbled in on us once, looking for drugs,” Tweedledee added. “He ended up in the Gatlinburg sewage treatment plant. The coroner put it down to a freak accident due to an overdose.”

“That’s wastewater under the bridge,” resumed Tweedledum. “What we’re really here for is to bring you up to speed. What do you know about the Siberian gas explosion of 1982?”

“That’s 26 years ago. I was four years old. Why would I know anything about it at all, and what the hell does it have to do with Chabon or putting me on the terrorist list, or weird people bringing me all the way down here?”

“Oh, you’re going to love this,” said Tweedledee. “It’s what brought down the Soviet Union. That and Charlie Wilson’s war in Afghanistan. See, the CIA got wind through a mole about a Soviet spy operation aimed at civilian technology instead of

military secrets. They were looking for the latest electronics, including computer chips.”

“Now there was this guy at the CIA named Gus Weiss,” continued Tweedledum. “He had a brilliant idea: let the Russians buy whatever they wanted, but tweak it a bit. One of the things they wanted was a computer control system to automate a new gas pipeline. This was going to put the Soviet Union on the map as a natural gas supplier, not just for domestic needs but for export to Europe.”

“Weiss’ plan worked like a charm,” Tweedledee took up again. “The control systems operated perfectly for six months. Then they went haywire, overheating the valves in the pipeline until – blooey! Biggest non-nuclear explosion in history.”

“And here’s the beauty of it,” Tweedledum concluded. “The Russkies never let out a peep about it. What were they going to do – fess up to stealing Western technology? And the further beauty of it was, they didn’t know if they could trust any of the other tech they’d stolen from the West. It screwed up all their industrial development planning.”

“Okay, so it’s an interesting story,” Jeff remarked. “But what’s the *point*?”

“I’m getting to that,” said Tweedledee. “Somebody had the bright idea of trying the same thing with a pacemaker produced by Chabon Technologies. I won’t tell you which agency, but it was a relatively obscure one that wanted to make a secret name for itself.”

“The current administration was having trouble with Pushtunistan,” Tweedledum continued. “The premier there didn’t seem to be cooperating with the War on Terror. The leader of the opposition seemed to be more amenable. But the President didn’t want to do anything about it; by this time, he realized America was in too deep elsewhere.”

“So this tiny agency decided to give the President a present,” Tweedledee went on. “It happened that the Pushtunistani premier had heart trouble, and was going to France for a pacemaker. Maybe because his own country’s medical system was primitive, maybe because he just didn’t trust the doctors there.”

“This tiny agency had a tiny budget, but ‘tiny’ is a relative term in the intelligence business,” continued Tweedledum. “It was enough to get the job done, to suborn the right man at Chabon, and to see to it that one particular pacemaker, programmed to go haywire in six months, made it to the surgical team in Paris and into the premier’s chest.”

“Blooey!” exclaimed Tweedledee.

“Trouble is, unlike the control systems for that gas pipeline, the evidence survived,”

Tweedledum explained. “This tiny agency hadn’t thought of that. Also hadn’t thought of clearing the plan with Homeland Security, let alone the President. Now the US of A is going to be in deep shit unless we can document that it really was a rogue operation and the administration had nothing to do with it.”

“Well, Homeland Security knew that the pacemaker came from Chabon, but they didn’t want to handle it in Washington, because – who knows? – it might get back to the tiny agency, and they might destroy all the evidence.” Tweedledee looked like the canary that swallowed the cat. “So they assigned it to us, independent contractors that nobody else in the capital knows about. Our kung fu is the best; we hacked into their systems in no time, got the goods on Reynolds. But just in case anybody caught on, and to avoid publicly compromising that tiny agency, we wanted to leave a false trail.”

Tweedledum looked even more like the canary that swallowed the cat. “That’s why we came up with our own Steven Hatfill. Chabon and the tiny agency will get off the hook, but not without owing us. And all we had to do was pick out your name and tell Homeland Security to put you on their list, and—”

“*What?*” shouted Jeff.

“*What?*” shouted Liz, or whoever she was, at almost the same moment.

“We think the Pushtunistanis will buy it,” said Tweedledee.

Jeff looked at them, looked at Liz.

“I swear I knew nothing about this,” Liz said. “I thought it was just Truck making you the fall guy to cover his own ass.”

“Right, you knew nothing about it,” Jeff shouted. “You think I’m going to fall for a crock like that?”

Tweedledee tried to intervene. “Hey, man, nothing to get upset about. We’re going to give you a whole new life.”

Jeff had been stunned. Then shocked. Now he was angry.

“I don’t *want* your whole new life, I want *my* life, you shit. What about my family? What about my friends? What about my work?”

All the while, he was stepping towards the Tweedles, shaking his fist.

Liz or whoever put out her arm to restrain him.

“Jeff, I’ll straighten this out,” she appealed to him. “You’ve got to trust me.”

“What, you’re going to spread your legs like that flying woman? Or do you even know about the flying woman?”

“I know. But not here, not now--”

“Shut the fuck up. You have any fucking idea what I’ve been through? I get up in the morning like I always do. I go to work like I always do. I love my job, I love my work. Then suddenly I’m branded as a terrorist, and people are trying to kill me, and some flying woman says she’s there to rescue me and fucks my brains out first, and then I’m handed down this daisy chain of secret agents, and finally I find out my ‘rescuers’ are the people who’re fucking me over.”

“You’re making things difficult,” Tweedledum commented.

“That’s enough,” said Liz. And then: “Jeff, I’m sorry.”

“What’s your next move, *cry*? I’m sure you and the Tweedles will have a big laugh together after I leave.”

“Leave?”

“You heard me.”

“Please don’t. You don’t know what you’re getting into.”

“I know enough to know I want to get out of it. What are you going to do – drown me in the sewer plant like that druggie?”

“No. I’d never. I *swear*...” began Liz.

“I don’t hear your pet geeks making any promises. I’m outta here,” ended Jeff, and headed – resolutely, even if a bit stiffly -- for the door.

IV

Jeff had walked for miles without thinking about where he was going, let alone what he was going to do when he got there. It was only when he realized that he was hungry that he came back to himself.

He’d come out on the Dolly Parton Parkway and, as luck would have it, there was an IHOP a few blocks away. “Hot cakes and sausage, make ‘em nice and brown,” he told the waitress after waiting 20 minutes to get a place to sit.

Twenty minutes had been enough to think about things, and they were mostly dark thoughts. He’d been afraid Liz and the Tweedles would come after him, but every time

he'd looked back there'd been no sign of them. Maybe they had somebody else looking for him, maybe...

He had to get out of town, but how? He still had that wallet, but he didn't dare use the plastic – that could be traced. Cash? A hundred dollars in twenties. Enough for food, for now, but it wouldn't get him very far down the road. Nowhere near enough for a plane, and airlines would be suspicious of that much cash even if he had it.

Was there a train around here? A bus?

He stopped a few people and got “duh” responses – they were tourists, after all, they didn't *live* here. One of them did allow that she'd come through Sevierville, Sevierville being the county seat. Maybe there was a Greyhound stop there. Or maybe he'd have to schlep all the way to Knoxville. It'd be easier to lose himself there, anyway.

So he set off westwards along the parkway, which was nothing like a parkway back home except for having a grassy median strip. Both sides were like a solid wall of tourist traps, shops selling touristy crap and eateries like Corky's BarBQ -- which had an ugly statuette of a pig out front.

There was that stupid Jurassic Park ride. One boat had just left when Jeff paused there for a moment to get his breath, and there was some family waiting for the next. He thought it was funny that they weren't moving at all, until he realized they were actually *dummies*.



“They also serve who only stand and wait,” came a voice from right behind him.

Jeff practically jumped out of his skin, then looked around.

It was Liz.

“I think I’ve got Tweedledum and Tweedledee talked around,” she said. “It took me a while.”

“How did you find me?” Jeff asked, ignoring the business about the Tweedles.

“I figured you’d be trying to hoof it out of town. You amateurs are all alike. But you’d better come with me now.”

“If you think I’m going back there—“

“I’m not going back there myself. But we have to move fast.”

“Right. And here I was counting on going to Dollywood. Taking in the Sons of the Revenooors. Getting you some Dolly Parton nipple cream.”

“This is serious. Things are getting out of control.”

“For all I know, you’re the one getting out of control. Things aren’t going your way. You’re pissed. Well, guess what? *I’m* pissed. I’m pissed with the whole lot of you. So why don’t you just piss off?”

Jeff suddenly realized he had been talking too loud, and looked around him. But nobody was paying attention. Maybe that was par for the course here, like the dummies.

“You’ll never make it alone,” Liz said. “Not when your name and face show up on CNN.”

“Is that what Tweedle and Tweedle are up to? Rattin’ me out again?”

“If it were, they’d have ended up in the sewer plant.”

Jeff was too mad to wonder how Liz could have managed that by herself. Instead, he gave her a shove – or tried to. She was as unyielding as... an ox, he guessed, although he’d never seen one in the flesh.

Stubborn as an ox, for sure. She glared at him for a moment, then spoke in a low voice.

“I don’t know how much time we’ve got, but we’ve got none to waste. If you like the way you’re living, you’d better stop fucking around. My car’s around the corner, but we’ll have to do something about that, among other things.”

When it came to that, Jeff didn't particularly like the way he was living. But he liked the alternative even less. Maybe he could get away later, but for now he'd better play along.

The car was a late model Honda Accord, bright red. Jeff didn't ask where it came from.

* * *

They headed east along Highway 441, taking the Gatlinburg bypass, into the Great Smokies.

The two-lane highway went through a loop-the-loop, then a series of hairpin turns. The view was spectacular, but he was in no mood to appreciate it. The more distant mountains were lost in the haze that gave them their name. At the North Carolina border, there was a scenic overlook and some sort of a monument, but Liz breezed right past it. There was a switchback where the road doubled back on itself for miles, then a steady downgrade.

The view took Jeff's mind off his troubles for a few minutes at a time, but the rest of the time he was so nervous he was almost shaking. Liz hadn't made it any easier when she laid it out for him.

"Here's the thing," she told him. "Your former boss Tyler Reynolds turns out to be a big campaign contributor. That gives him an in with the administration. Not the president, of course, but people who have the ear of the president. They can't let him take the fall for that pacemaker, because then nobody would believe the White House, or at least the CIA, hadn't authorized the operation."

"Right, they can't afford to dump Truck."

"This is no joke, Jeff. The story's about to break on Al Jazeera. Tweedledum and Tweedledee gave Reynolds and the administration just the break they needed. I still don't know whether they were in on it, or just stupid. I'm not waiting to find out, and neither are you. But I can't go through intelligence channels any more; I can't trust them. This whole rescue operation may have been a set-up to make you look guilty."

"Why should you care? What's in it for you?"

“If you’ve been set up, I’ve been set up. I don’t like being set up.”

“You don’t like being knocked down, either. What’s that all about?”

“I’ll tell you later. Right now, we have to spread some chaff, confuse their radar.”

The trip to Cherokee turned out to be an anticlimax. All Liz wanted him to do was visit an ATM machine with his Adam Stone card.

“Of *course* they monitor them,” she said, anticipating his objections. “They’ll think you’re headed east. Especially if you clean out the account.”

Moments later, Jeff got back in the car with \$500 in his hand and Liz headed back up 441. But this time they stopped in Gatlinburg – a tonier tourist trap designed to look like a Swiss alpine village – and grabbed a late lunch at a steakhouse. Cash, of course. Instead of returning to Pigeon Forge, Liz hung a right on 321, which started out as a thoroughfare but gradually turned into a narrow, twisting mountain road that made 441 look like a straightaway.

Nothing but cliffs and gullies most of the way, yet there were hardscrabble farms here and there. Jeff glanced at them idly – what he could see of them through the trees. Without warning. Liz turned down a bumpy, narrow dirt road leading to a place even more decrepit than the one outside Pigeon Forge. Unpainted clapboard, dingy windows. Through the open front door he could see unvarnished floorboards.

“One of my getaways,” she said. “It’s not as bad as it looks. We’ll be staying here for a few days. Go right in and make yourself at home. I’ve got to head to the Food City across I-40 in Newport and lay in a ton of groceries.”

V

Liz hadn’t been exaggerating. At least, not by much. When she returned a couple of hours later, she had a trunk full of groceries. There were canned goods, bottled water and energy drinks, energy bars, nuts, dried fruits, trail mix, beef jerky, sausage. Nothing fresh or frozen – no refrigerator here. And a case of some local beer.

“Dinner later,” she told Jeff. “Right now, we have to deal with the car.” With that, she took a can of blue spray paint from a carton on the back seat. There were more like it in the box. Also rolls of masking tape and some old newspapers.

“Here,” Liz said. “You start on the left side. Don’t worry about getting paint on you;

I-got you a couple of changes of clothes. Do worry about taping over the windows. You can handle that, right?"

Jeff only nodded as she handed him the spray can. He fetched some newspapers and tape for himself, and Liz did likewise.

"It'll look shitty, but people will just think we're cheap," she said, as she started in on the right side.

Jeff didn't like the way it looked after he taped over the windows on his side and began spraying. Too many drip marks. You had to be quick playing the spray back and forth, he figured out as he went along. But not too quick, or you'd miss spots. There was a kind of rhythm to it.

Liz was faster painting her side; she must have done this before. She was working on the top before he got finished with his side. They both worked the hood, after taping over the lights; ditto the rear.

"It'll do," she summed up when they were finished. "I'll change the plates later."

It was near dark, time to eat.

* * *

"You planning a long stay here?" Jeff ventured, over a meal of corned beef hash and canned peas, with beer to wash it down.

The table was as unfinished as the floor and the walls. They sat on chairs nobody would have put out for a yard sale back home. There was a wood stove, and an old bed in the corner. That was it. They ate by lantern light, their faces flickering in each other's eyes.

"Just a few days. Then we head west. Denver."

"Why Denver? I don't get it."

"Trust me."

"Why should I trust you?"

"Because I'm about to trust *you*. With my life,"

"You haven't even trusted me with your name."

She hesitated for a moment.

“Olga... Olga Alekseyeva Volkova.”

“You don’t look Russian. You don’t sound Russian.”

“That’s the whole idea. I was well trained by the KGB — in a town that never existed.”

“Wait a minute. The KGB died with the Soviet Union, almost 20 years ago. You—“

“I’m older than I look. Also stronger than I look. You already noticed that back at the Jurassic boat place, I trust.”

With that, she took the beer bottle in her right hand and squeezed. With a loud crack, it shattered.

Olga held up her hand, palm forward. It was unmarked.

“Furthermore, I’m not easily injured,” she said.

“Like the flying woman,” Jeff said, with a thrill of recognition.

“No, not like her. For one thing, I can’t fly.”

The thrill on his face faded.

“I don’t understand,” he confessed.

“That’s understandable,” she said. “Very few people know about the Supremis at all, let alone their differences. It takes Level Seven clearance.”

Whatever that means, Jeff mused.

“I have a long and complicated story to tell,” Olga began. “Please bear with me.”

Her story was indeed long and complicated, and would have been unbelievable but for his encounter with the flying woman and now... Velorians and Aureans, fighting a war of shadows on Earth and a war of blood and fire elsewhere. It was scary, damned scary, if only half of it were true. But there was something missing; he knew it and she knew it and she must know that he knew it. He could tell by the look on her face.

“I’m an experiment, Jeff. As far as I know, I’m the only survivor of a program the Aureans ran with the Russians back in Soviet days. Why they did it, I don’t know. Maybe Near Earth Command wanted to impress the Imperial Court, or maybe it just sensed a singular opportunity on Earth to develop super-spies or super-soldiers. The Aureans shut it down after Stalin died; they didn’t trust--”

“You were born before *Stalin* died?”

“I told you I’m older than I look. I was nine at the time. That makes me 64 now. But

I wouldn't have reached ten if my father hadn't spirited me away. They killed the others, and the Russian research team. I'm pretty sure of that; at least, there haven't been traces of them."

"If what you say is true, I don't see how you could have had a human father."

"He contributed some genes. More than that, he contributed his love. I could never have passed for human without his help. How he got away with it, I'll never know. But he was a good Communist. He raised me to be a good Communist. So of course I joined the Young Pioneers and the Komsomol, and was so precocious that I was fast-tracked to the KGB, where I learned to be an American. In that town that never existed."

"I guess you've got me going."

"Back in the fifties, there was an exposé in *Time* magazine about a town in Ukraine called Vinnitsa, which was supposedly an exact replica of an American town, and where KGB trainees learned to speak and think in English. It was supposedly stocked with all kinds of American consumer goods. That should have been the tip-off that it was a hoax."

"Why?"

"Because people, even in the KGB, would have stolen those goods and sold them on the black market. But then, nobody at *Time* ever looked at a map, because Vinnitsa's on it – a city, actually, a district capital. But I got that training, just the same,"

"In another town?"

"At the KGB Academy. Where we really were taught to speak and think in perfect English, and became thoroughly familiarized with American culture and consumer goods. Only when we asked for a Coke, we got bad tea in a Coke bottle. I was a quick learner; they sent me here when I was only 22. I had the kind of resumé and the kind of body that could get me places fast. It took me less than a year to get into Bobby Kennedy's bed, and Moscow Center was pleased with my reports. I thought I was on the inside track; I thought he was going to be President. You know the rest."

"Not about you. Did you go after Nixon?"

"God! I'd have hated that, but I'd have done it if I'd still believed. Only I didn't. Czechoslovakia and all that. It was time for a change. A *real* change. And I could do it, but I needed help – just as I'm going to need yours now."

"I don't know anything about identity theft, if that's what you're driving at. They

gave me this new I.D.; don't ask me how."

"I'm talking about identity *change*, identity *makeover*. You must have figured out by now that I'm the equivalent of an Aurean Beta in strength and resistance to injury. But I'm also a shapeshifter."

"Christ, you're not going to tell me you turn into a wolf at the full moon!"

"Nothing like that. And nowhere near that easy. It's very limited change, just facial and body details, and it takes a lot of energy. The first time I did it, I had a KGB handler watch over me. I told him as little as I could, based on what my father had told me. Only my story was that I'd been given a slow poison, like in *D.O.A.*, and that this was the cure. He watched over me, kept me fed – I had to eat like several horses – and iced me down to control the fever. Georgy didn't understand what he was doing, but he didn't question it. Only, when he saw the change, saw the new me... I thought I could persuade him to keep quiet, Like, 'Nobody's going to believe you anyway.' But he was a loyal KGB man to the last. So had to kill him."

Jeff should have been shocked. But he was beyond shock by now. So all he said was, "And then?"

"I disappeared, I lay low. Made good money as a stripper, here and there. More than if I'd've waited tables – and that would've had to be on the books at any restaurant worth working for. I couldn't pursue a real career, even in porn. It was strictly odd jobs, cash on the barrelhead, no questions asked. As it was, I'd buy new IDs, change my make-up, start wearing new wigs every decade or so. On the plus side, I went to several colleges, earned several degrees – not that I could use them for anything, but it felt good to have them. And then came 9/11."

"You wanted to serve your country."

"I wanted to serve my country. I could spend all night telling you about how I got into intelligence work, and another few nights telling you about how my country didn't really want to be served. One of my degrees was in computer science; I was arrested and then recruited after I hacked into a CIA database. I could see that electronic war was the new frontier, and I thought I'd be part of it – going after terrorist networks. Only, most of the people I worked under were more interested in getting brownie points adding names to the domestic terrorist watch list – the one you're on now. Lately, they've put me into

damage control. They don't call it that, but that's what it amounts to – covering up our own messes instead of messing up the enemy. You're just the latest example."

Jeff didn't know what to say.

"I've got to change my life again. I still have several unused alternate IDs, but that's not enough. The next time the world sees me, it won't be *this* me. If it ever sees me again at all."

She got up from the table, walked across the room, and pried up a floorboard. Under the board was a metal box, which she pried open. In the box was a syringe, along with a gold bracelet.

"The needle's an alien alloy," Liz said. "Even so, it would be almost impossible to prick my skin without the bracelet on my arm. If I were a prime, it wouldn't be possible at all. The drug triggers a sequence that turns off some genes and turns on others, all having to do with exterior physical appearance. The Aurean-Russian lab gave me only two settings; that was hard enough. So I'll end up looking like the original Olga Volkova."

She paused for a moment.

"If it works," she added. "And I'm counting on you for that."

She laid it all out for him, then. The constant feeding, the constant trips to the well, it was going to be grueling. He'd need a lot of coffee to keep up, but she'd brought plenty of that, too.

"But get a good night's sleep tonight," she warned him. "Your work starts first thing in the morning. It will take that long for the process to begin. I'll set the alarm."

With that, she put the bracelet on her left arm, pushed the needle into it with her right – very slowly, very deliberately – and injected the drug. Then removed the bracelet.

She let him take the bed, settling for the floor herself.

"You're the one who needs something soft to lie on," she explained.

VI

Olga's screams awakened him before the alarm. Jeff stumbled out of bed, trying to collect his thoughts as he looked across the room. Olga was sweating like a pig, writhing uncontrollably.

Jeff looked at the clock. An hour and a half early. Had she miscalculated? No time to ponder that. *Food first. Energy food.*

He grabbed some summer sausage, tore off the wrapping, and held it out to her. She gave no sign of seeing it, but she must have smelled it. She ripped it out of his hands and started wolfing it down, while he gathered more of the same, plus plenty of dried fruits and nuts. Jeff cursed himself for not being able to get them out of cans and packets faster. He should have seen to this last night.

Olga was running on pure instinct. Whatever he put near her, she quickly found and devoured, chewing rapidly or sometimes not at all. Her hunger assuaged for the moment, she seemed calmer – but still sweating and incoherent.

Jeff raced to the well, brought up a bucket of cold water and threw it on her, then went back for more – not forgetting to put more food within her reach. He settled into an almost automatic rhythm: food and water, food and water. He interrupted the routine only to boil up some coffee, which he left on the stove, taking a swig whenever he felt he needed it.

As the day wore on, Olga's fever seemed to be under control. But her hunger hardly abated. It was only in the afternoon that he began to notice that she looked... different. The change was too slow to be perceptible, but over the course of hours he could tell that she looked... off. There was something wrong with her face, as if it were a reflection in a funhouse mirror but not as obvious. Her body... she seemed to be losing a little weight, for all her voracious appetite. The calories were all going into energy, and reconstruction.

Beef jerky, canned chili, nuts, raisins, energy bars. And when she was thirsty, the energy drinks. He hoped he had enough. He hadn't eaten himself, except for a couple of the energy bars. There were still trips to the well, but not as frequent as before. He could almost imagine, at times, that she was sleeping normally. But there was nothing normal about this. As soon as he placed food near her, she would reach for it.

So it went through the day, and through the next night. Food for her, coffee for him, cold water for her, coffee for him. He brewed a fresh pot. It tasted vile, but he drank it anyway. Her features had shifted; they were settling into a new pattern now. He could see that much by lantern light. Her appetite was still there, but not as desperate. Perhaps by morning...

It was only when he woke up that he realized he had dozed off – despite the coffee, despite his resolve. He looked at the clock: Two hours had passed. Dawn was breaking outside. He looked at Olga. She was lying there, breathing lightly, but showing no sign of consciousness. He brought her food, but she ignored it. He touched her then: no sign of fever; but no reaction to his hand, either. He ran for the well, drew a bucket of water, ran back in, and threw it at her. Still nothing.

It Jeff himself who now felt feverish: a hot flash of panic. He had failed her; she had put her trust in him, and he had been found wanting. She was beautiful; that made it even harder to bear.

I've lost her. That was all he could think. *I've lost her.*

No longer able to bear the sight, he stumbled back outside, head hanging in despair, paying no attention to where he was going. He didn't see the tree coming, only felt the pain when he slammed into it. He slipped to the ground in a daze, beyond caring whether he was badly hurt, beyond caring even whether he lived or died. He simply lay there, aware of the morning sounds, aware of the rising sun, but completely indifferent to the beauty of the world around him.

“Good morning,” a voice suddenly called. “You look like you've taken a tumble.”

Who could be visiting here?

He rolled over, glanced in the direction of the voice, and his spirit was reborn. It was *her*. A small part of him thought: *Her body's different, so of course her voice is different.* But only one thought, only one word, could escape his lips: “Olga.”

She had already dressed. She was standing there in front of him.



VII

They drove west, careful to observe the speed limits, taking secondary highways instead of the interstates as much as possible but avoiding large centers of population. An amateurishly-painted blue car might attract attention, and while the substitute plates Olga had put on would check out under another of her IDs, they didn't match this particular vehicle.

When Olga had told Jeff who they were going to see in Denver, his jaw dropped.

“*Lisa Matthews?* Why not Bill Gates?”

“Because Lisa can help us and Bill can’t,” Olga said. “She’s Earth’s Protector.”

“*Kira?* You told me about Kira, but--”

“You expected a mild-mannered reporter for a major metropolitan newspaper? Get real.”

“A few days ago, I’d have said the same thing to anybody who tried to tell me some crazy story about super-soldiers from other worlds.”

“Reality is, money talks. Running an international pharmaceutical company brings in billions. Which makes Lisa a billionaire. Which in turn makes it possible for her to do a lot of things no reporter could ever dream of. And the thing is, she enjoys her work. She enjoys doing good in a manner that doesn’t violate the Prime Directive.”

Olga wasn’t forthcoming about just how Kira/Lisa got to run a pharmaceutical outfit and become a billionaire. He suspected that even Google wouldn’t have the straight story; maybe a few millions of her billions had gone into covering her trail. Which reminded him that he hoped to hell Olga had been as good at covering theirs.

At least he’d gotten over yesterday morning’s shock.

“It must work faster the second time around,” she’d told him. “I hadn’t counted on that.”

It was a relief to know that. He sported a nasty bruise from his encounter with the tree, and was fighting a killer headache, but was otherwise okay. He insisted on doing his share of the driving, although he presumed that Olga’s stamina – like her strength – must exceed his by a factor of five.

They made it to Arkansas in late afternoon on the first day, crossing the Mississippi at Memphis – no avoiding the interstate -- then heading northwest towards Missouri. It was fairly flat country here, but the Ozarks lay ahead.

They stopped for dinner at a place called Catfish Heaven, which at least beat the McDonalds outlets that had sufficed for breakfast and lunch. Good catfish at a good price – the fish farms down in Mississippi were really hurting, they heard, on account of cheap imports from Vietnam. People at the next table were talking about how the government wasn’t doing anything for ordinary people.

When the sun was close to setting, they didn't even look for a motel; they wanted to save their cash and keep a low profile. Olga spotted a lonely side road that didn't look well-maintained and led past a series of scrubby small farms. One had been abandoned by the look of it – the farmhouse had kudzu all over it, and the fields had gone to weeds. Olga pulled the car around to the back, and checked the place out – just to make sure the floor wouldn't cave in on them.

“Not exactly the Holiday Inn,” Jeff remarked.

That was kind of a conversation stopper, but conversation was about the only thing to do with no radio, no TV and nothing much to look at after dusk fell. So he and Olga sat there in the dark, saying nothing much until she got something going.

“If you could have anything you wished for, what would it be?” she asked.

“Just to get out of this mess. Just to have a normal life again.”

“Not riches, not fame?”

“That's... that's not just me. Not that I'd object to being rich and famous. But I'd want it to be on my own terms, working at something I enjoyed, something worthwhile, something that made my life worthwhile.”

“Were you doing that at Chabon?”

“Most of the time. See, I wasn't working on the pacemakers and other things myself. I was on the corporate information side, explaining the technology to the lay audience – not just how the devices worked, but how they were changing people's lives, and not just saving them but making them happier, more fulfilling.”

“Is that what you'd wish for the world? To make everybody happy?”

“Why are you asking me? You're not a genie too, are you?”

“No, I can't change the world any more than you can.”

“There was this X-Files episode once. You ever watch that show?”

“Once in a while.”

“Anyway, these low-lives find a genie and start making all kinds of stupid wishes. Like one wants to be invisible, and gets run down by a truck as soon as he tries to cross the street. When Fox Mulder gets hold of the genie, he makes what he thinks is a really noble and altruistic wish instead: world peace. Only everyone but him disappears; that's the only way you can have peace without changing human nature.”

“So what happened?”

“Well, he unwished his first wish. Then he racked his brains trying to come up with a foolproof wish that really would make the world better. Only he *couldn't*. And then remembered that the genie *hated* being a genie, hated granting stupid wishes that always went wrong. She wished she could just have a normal life. So that was his third wish. For *her*. Not to play God. Not to try to make everybody happy. Just to let her and the rest of the human race have the *chance*. A normal chance in a normal world.”

“So we’re back to normality.”

“There’s a lot to be said for it.”

“I’m not normal, not for this world.”

“Would you want to be?”

“Not really. But it would be nice to have something resembling a normal life.”

“And what does that mean?”

“I guess I’ll have to sleep on it.”

So passed the evening of the first day.

VIII

They threaded their way through the Ozarks the next day, northwest and then west over local byways. The worst of it was Branson, Missouri, a mini-Nashville as touristy as Dollywood. At least there was a Cracker Barrel there for a decent lunch, but the traffic slowed them down, along with the winding roads, and it was near dark by the time they got to Kansas.

No time to look for abandoned accommodations; anyway, the area looked to be a bit more prosperous. Wheat fields as far as their eyes could see, and their eyes could see a lot farther here in the Great Plains. They stopped at a Quik Trip for take-out sandwiches and drinks, which they consumed in the car. They hit the road again, angling northwest, until the headlights revealed a fallow field.\.

Jeff took a chance, bumped his way across the field as far as a line of trees, then killed the lights. But there were still lights in the sky, for it had been a perfectly clear day and it was now a perfectly clear night. He could see Olga by moonlight; she must be able to see him better. Enhanced night vision, or tachyon vision. Whatever.

They lay there together, side-by-side, looking up at the stars as if the stars looked down at them.

“They aren’t the same to me any more,” Jeff told Olga.

“Have I spoiled them for you?”

“No. Not really. It’s just that, I used to wonder if there was anybody out there. And now I know. People like you. Even people like me.”

“The Scalantrans, too. The Pacts. Even, somewhere, the Vendorians.”

“Can you point to any of their worlds – their stars, I mean?”

“Not really. Most of them are too far to see from here, even if I knew what direction. And the people who travel between them think of wormhole connections, not vectors. They don’t think about how the crow would fly, if a crow could fly through space.”

“It’s strange. The Velorians come from another star. So do the Aureans. And yet here you are, with Aurean Beta genes, and you’ve never been off-planet. Do you feel left out?”

“Only when I get fed up with the people I work with on *this* planet. Which has been more often of late. Still, if Kira can straighten things out for us here, I think I’ll be content.”

“After which, there won’t be any ‘us.’”

“Do you want there to be an ‘us’?”

It was too dark to see her expression, but he sensed that her mood had changed. For the past two days, he had forced himself to ignore the fact that he was traveling with a beautiful woman. Tonight he was lying next to a beautiful woman – a goddess. He tried to ignore the longing in his heart, the aching in his cock, and could find no words.

“At least part of you wants there to be an us,” Olga said now.

That night vision or tachyon vision again!

“I...”

“It’s all right,” she said. “I want it too.”

Olga guided his hand to her crotch. It was damp, even through her jeans. She sighed at his touch, and placed her own hand on his crotch; he drew a sharp intake of breath as her felt her caress through his pants, and a sharper one when she unzipped his fly and took him in her mouth.

Oh God! Jeff thought as he felt her lips on him, her tongue swirling over the tip of his cock. “Oh God!” he moaned as he came, as she sucked up his cum.

“That’s just for starters,” Olga told him.

There were rustling sounds in the near dark as she undressed, and more of the same as he followed. In the moonlight, he could see her naked, and his mind’s eye filled in the details from what he had seen during her transformation. At the time, any lust he felt had been overcome by fear. And knowing what she was had made her seem untouchable. But now...

Now he could feel her perfect hairless pussy, dripping with desire, and drink his fill of her fragrant juices as she trembled and cried out with delight from his lips and teeth on her swollen clit. He could suck and bite her proud breasts, pointing north in defiance of gravity. He could run his hands all over her silky smooth skin, even as her own hands explored him – and pulled him down for a round of deep kisses.

The ground was rough, but Jeff hardly noticed it, hardly cared that he might end up with scratches and bruises. When they embraced, he could feel her magnificent breasts pressing against his chest, their nipples like bullets. He worked his way down from her lips, biting her nipples again as hard as he could, and she screamed with her release. By then he was hard again, aching for his own release.

“I want you inside me now!” Olga gasped, and Jeff was overcome with joy as he plunged into her. So hot, so tight, so slick! He threw caution to the winds as he drove his cock deep into her again and again, knowing he couldn’t hurt her, thrilling at the thought that no man could have her unless she wanted him to. And she *wanted* him, wanted him as much as he wanted her.

She ground against him with her hips until he couldn’t stand it any more; and as he came, as he poured his passion into her, it was as if he had crossed into another world – a world beyond pain or fear or loneliness, a world where happiness was always within reach.

It was slower the second time, more tender. And the third...

So passed the evening of the second day.

On the third day, Jeff woke before Olga. That seemed improbable but it was true. He sat up and looked down at her. She had pulled a sweater over herself sometime during the night; he couldn't see her body. But he could see her face.

It was all dreamy; he reckoned that she was having good dreams. The thought made his heart skip a beat, made him feel all warm and good inside – that he had put that look on her face, that he had been a man to her as a man *should* be to a woman.

As if she could read his mind as she slept, her eyes flickered open just then.



“Thanks. I needed that,” were her first words.

Jeff felt himself blushing.

“No need for that. You were good. Better than Bobby Kennedy.”

“I can’t imagine you being needy. Not that way. Any man...”

“Any man would want me, I know. I see their looks all the time, their longing. But I can’t trust just any man. Only those who know what I am and won’t tell, and sometimes not even those.”

“Did Bobby?”

“Of course not. But then he didn’t care. He thought I was just very athletic. Even so, I had to be very careful. Hold myself back. And imagine it would all be worth it, because once we defeated the Americans, once Communism had triumphed, I’d go down as the greatest spy in history.”

“Instead of going down on me?”

“You taste better than Bobby, too.”

Jeff blushed again.

“Seriously, though, maybe that greatest spy thing would have been a non-starter. Maybe the Secret Service or the FBI would have checked me out. Maybe I’d have ended up in the dustbin of history. It’s just as well. I *hate* history now, but at least I didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“What about since 9/11?”

“I don’t want to talk about that.”

But she did talk about it on the road – about how too many people in the intelligence agencies wanted to *look* as if they were doing something about terrorism without actually *doing* anything.

“Those lists like the one you’re on? They’re a joke, like the body counts the military faked in Vietnam to convince people they were winning the war. Does anybody believe we’ve got 400,000 jihadists running around the country? With names like Edward Allen? They’re data mining for nuggets about terrorists in phone records and getting fool’s gold most of the time.”

“I watch CNN too.”

“But you’ve never seem things from inside. It’s crazy. You know what I am. I could take out Al Qaeda leaders bare-handed.”

“Isn’t there a law against that sort of thing?”

“Oh, it’s all right to kill people as long as they aren’t important. The CIA once took out an American hotel keeper in Guatemala because he’d pissed off some friends of the station chief. They figured there’d never be much of an investigation, and there wasn’t. That business with the Pushtuni premier they’re trying to make you the fall guy for came out of left field. Langley would never have okayed it.”

“You were talking about Al Qaeda before?”

“They know where a lot of the top leaders are. Better than that, they know where they get their money – Saudi billionaires, mostly. I told them I could take care of these people and make it look like a series of accidents. But instead they wanted me to find Al Qaeda connections to some rock singers who’d trashed the President.”

“It’s a wonder you stayed on.”

“I attracted the attention of the Velorians. They can always use help. That’s how I came to meet Kira. Until then, I’d thought I was all alone. I still am, in a way. I’m not like them, and I could never be like the Aureans. I’ve run a few errands for Kira; nothing epochal, but it freed up her people for things that were. She hoped I might be of some use as a double-agent against Near Earth Command, but she couldn’t think of a good cover story. Anyway, I’d have been afraid.”

“*You?* Afraid?”

“You have to understand. Primes are the masters. Betas are their slaves – at least unless they serve in the military or some vital industry. Beta females are at the mercy of male Primes. They serve as comfort women. But there’s no comfort in it for *them*. Primes have to wear gold just to keep from killing them, but most wear as little as necessary – so the Beta ends up bruised inside and out, in constant pain and constant fear. Because, if she fails to please her master, or her master just gets tired of her...”

“I don’t want to hear any more,” Jeff pleaded. “I’m getting sick to my stomach.”

The miles passed quickly as they drove through Kansas. Even on two-lane blacktop highways you could make good time. There was little other traffic, the towns being few and far between. There were still wheat fields, but also corn. It was drier here than in the

eastern part of the state and large stretches had been allowed to revert to prairie, some of it grazed by cattle. Small oilfields appeared here and there, and then a huge wind farm.

It began to get more bleak when they entered eastern Colorado. They gassed up and stocked up on edibles at Cliff's Shamrock and the Ray's Ag and Food in the first town across the state line. Holly had been hit by a tornado a year earlier, they were told – there were vacant lots where some homes had been deemed beyond repair. Past town, more cattle ranches, another wind farm. The ground was flat, and the prairie grass sparse.

"Before it gets mountainous, it's monotonous," Olga remarked, as Jeff hung a right on U.S. 385. They'd decided at Holly to avoid the more populated route along U.S. 50 up the Arkansas River Valley. "But they say you can spot Pike's Peak from here on a clear day. Hey, there it is."

Jeff turned his head, trying to make out the spot of white on the Western horizon. There was an 18-wheeler coming the other way; he saw that, but he missed the dude in a pickup trying to pass the truck. A horn blast alerted him, and he swung to the right – off the road and into a ditch.

"Shit," he said, trying to pull out of the ditch and hearing spinning wheels.

"It's all right," said Olga. "I can--"

The 18-wheeler and the pickup were gone, but another pickup approached from the north and pulled up across the road from them.

"You folks okay?" came a friendly voice.

"Just a little shook up," said Jeff, which was indeed the case.

"Well, you just hang in there. I can get you some help from Lamar."

The Good Samaritan got on his cell phone, evidently calling some garage he knew about.

"Don't you guys worry, help is on the way," he said afterwards.

"Double shit," said Jeff, as he watched the pickup head down the road.

"We've got to get out of here fast," said Olga. "You just steer, okay?"

Without further ado she got behind the car and pushed. Jeff could see her through the rear-view mirror, see that she wasn't even breaking a sweat. She had to stop for a moment when another motorist breezed by – no Good Samaritan, he – but after that she had them back on the blacktop in no time. Checking first to make sure nobody else was

coming, she had Jeff look under the car while she lifted it.

“No damage to the undercarriage,” he reported with a sigh of relief.

“I’m sorry about all this,” she said, after they were on their way again.

“I’m just glad we got away before ‘help’ arrived. I wonder what they’ll think.”

“They’ll think somebody else came along first, is all. Not to worry.”

Sunset found them at junction near a place called Kit Carson. They took a break there, but only a break, because Olga wanted to make it an all-nighter and reach Denver before dawn. She’d have the energy for that, even after R&R in a swale several hundred yards off the highway.

“I’d almost forgotten you were superhuman,” Jeff remarked, as they were finishing a hasty supper of Deli Express sandwiches and Snapple.

“It’s not that simple,” Olga said. “I might have been able to actually pick up the car, but I couldn’t have balanced it, let alone carried it. It would be showing off, only I’d drop the car, and then where would we be? It’s stupid. It’s smarter not to let people know what you can do unless you really have to. I mean, I could take a bullet for you – I can stand up to small arms fire. But it’s better not to get into that kind of situation in the first place.”

“I’ll have to remember that. I wouldn’t want to put you out.”

“Anyway, I’ve got better things to do with my body than stop bullets. And knowing I can have any man I want and don’t have to worry about rape is a real turn-on. The only problem is finding the right kind of man. A man who’s both good and hard. A man who has good taste.”

“For a woman who tastes good?”

“I see you’re ready for dessert,” she said, as she peeled off her pants and her panties.

Jeff lay back, admiring the view by the light of the moon, and she rewarded him – and herself – by sitting on his face. He could taste her fragrant juices, feel them running down his chin as he sucked on her clit, then bit it hard, and felt all aglow, all warm inside as she came.

Lifting him easily, she pulled off his clothes, then laid him on his back and impaled herself on him with her still-dripping cunt, riding him lovingly as he squeezed her breasts as hard as he could, reveling in the firmness. She let him pull her closer, so that he could

chew on her nipples, then grabbed her ass – feeling it move rhythmically as she slammed herself against him, until he exploded inside her and she came hard in response.

After several rounds, he was in a state of exhaustion – but also a state of bliss.

X

There was a rude awakening the next morning.

Jeff had slept through the rest of the drive in the back seat, missed the slow climb up U.S. 40 and then State 86 to the turnoff at State 83 that Olga reckoned would be the safest route into the city.

But when Olga shook him awake, they were parked on a dirt road in the middle of nowhere. She had *USA Today* in her hand.

“Looks like they got tired of looking for us in North Carolina,” she said, showing him the front page.

His picture was there (“Jeffrey Floyd Taylor, alias Adam Stone”). So was hers – but not the current version of her, and her supposed name was Elizabeth Andrews. They were wanted as terrorists, considered armed and dangerous. There wasn’t any mention of the Pushtunistan premier’s assassination, but maybe the State Department had convinced the Pushtunis to keep quiet about that as long as the perpetrators were taken care of.

“You’re about to get a change of hair color. Jet black; that’s the opposite of what they’re looking for. I picked it up at a Walgreens down the road.”

She handed him a box of something called Men’s Zone.

“There’s a stream down there,” she said, pointing. “Get naked and get busy. Not just the hair on your head; body hair, pubic hair. It’s a good thing you haven’t had a chance to shave the last few days. It’ll enhance the disguise.”

Jeff had to agree with that last point; his naturally blond stubble didn’t stand out. He was able to read the instructions in the dawn’s early light. It didn’t take long, but it made him look like a vagrant. It made him feel silly, too, but that beat being dead – as he might well be if the police had been given orders to shoot on sight. Once his hair was dry enough, he was ready to put his clothes back on and hit the road.

Denver at last.

They approached the mile-high city from the south, over State 83, which turned into Parker Road at the city limits. They left the car at a King Soopers market and caught an RTD bus downtown.

“We won’t be needing the car again, I hope,” Olga said. “Or if we do, it’s all up for us. Kira’s our only hope.”

“But how can we even get to see her? She can’t be expecting us.”

“Text message.”

“I thought we were staying off the loop.”

“Just this once. We’ll have disappeared by the time anybody comes looking for us. Assuming they know my cell phone.”

The message she texted didn’t make any sense to him: “Sunward 4234-782, rising.”

“It’s from a science fiction story familiar to both of us,” was all she’d say.

The headquarters of Tyrrel Corp. finally came into view. It was shaped like a glass sail under a steady breeze, so much so that the upper floors actually overhung the middle ones by thirty feet, overlooking an ornamental garden.

Lisa’s office – *Kira’s*; Jeff was having trouble getting used to that – was at the very top.

“They call it the forecastle, but not to her face,” Olga explained.

“Right,” said Jeff, as if this was something he was supposed to know.

A few minutes later, they got off the bus and headed through the revolving doors into the lobby. Olga marched straight to the security desk, Jeff following nervously.

“Luci Martel to see Lisa Matthews,” she said.

The security guard looked startled, but checked his terminal.

“You’re expected,” he said after a moment. Then he looked at Jeff dubiously.

“He’s with me,” Olga said.

“You’ve both still got to go through the scanner,” the guard said. “Then Elevator 3.”

He had to unlock a drawer to get their guest badges. Jeff suspected those particular badges were used only once in a blue moon. They cleared the scanners; no problem there.

Jeff wasn’t sure what to expect as he entered the elevator with Olga. Lisa Matthews was rarely seen; some TV newsman had once called her the female Howard Hughes. Yet

she was never reported to be a phobia-ridden recluse like Hughes.

Official pictures showed a mousy-looking woman in a dark business suit, tailored very conservatively to leave not only her chest but her arms and legs to the imagination. But no untrimmed fingernails, nothing like that. She did most of her company business by videoconferencing, even board meetings. People had gotten used to it, as they had also gotten used to her unexplained absences.

Jeff knew the explanation for those absences, at least. That put him in pretty select company: the President and a few key figures in the DOD and the intelligence services.

“She’s probably pretty nervous this year,” Olga told him. “It’s always difficult when there’s a change of administration. Usually, the outgoing President briefs his successor, but there was a hitch in 1963 when Kennedy never had a chance to brief Johnson. Kira had to introduce herself *Mission Impossible* style, with a tape that self-destructed. But it took a private demonstration at Camp David to convince him that she was for real.”

“JFK? Did you ever...”

“No, only Bobby. And I don’t know whether Jack shared Marilyn Monroe with him, in case you were wondering.”

The elevator didn’t actually lead to Kira’s office, but to the floor just below it. There was a receptionist, who’d been alerted to their arrival. “I’m Jenny,” she told them. “Ms. Matthews will see you now.” Jenny got up and unlocked the door to a stairwell. A short flight of steel stairs led to the inner sanctum of the woman in charge of a Fortune 500 company almost everyone knew about – the woman also charged with a mission, one hardly anyone knew about, on which rested nothing less than the fate of the planet.

The first thing they saw was the balcony overlooking Denver. The floor as well as the sides were of glass, and the view was spectacular, from the gardens 330 feet below to the nearby skyline and the distant mountains.

The first thing they heard was Kira’s voice behind them.

“It’s also good for quick exits.”

They turned to face Kira Jahr’ling, Protector of Earth. The view was spectacular.



“Fortunately, I didn’t have to make a quick exit this morning,” she continued. “But

you might have to. It seems that the two of you have gotten into quite a bit of trouble.”

“Not our doing,” Olga protested.

“I know,” Kira said. “Life hasn’t been fair to you. But then, it rarely is. I try to be as fair as I can, and you’ve rendered us valuable services in the past. That is the only reason I have for trying to help you and your... friend. I also feel some embarrassment over the involvement of a certain apprentice Scribe in this matter.”

“Scribe?” Jeff said. “But--”

“I see that Olga here has brought you up to speed on a lot of things. But *the* Scribe had nothing to do with this. The woman you met as Dawn has ears too big for her brains. She insinuated herself into certain intelligence circles, supposedly in the cause of research, and caught wind of your plight. She thought saving your life would make a good story for the folks back home, and managed to get other contacts involved – not knowing, of course, that one of them down the line would be Olga. It should never have happened.”

“You mean,” said Jeff, as calmly as he could, trying to hide the terror in his voice and the urge to shiver. “I should be dead now.”

“As I said, life is rarely fair, and it isn’t fair of me to ask you to understand. But you must understand, just the same, that I and those from Velor who work with me are here for a very narrow and very specific purpose. We are here to defend this planet against the Aureans. Nothing less, and nothing more. We cannot afford to become involved in local politics and local causes, even noble causes, because that would compromise our mission. This is what we always make clear to the President and to a few other heads of state we work with. If we didn’t, they’d want to get us involved in all sorts of things, from the war on terrorism to saving Darfur. It’s difficult enough as it is to impress on them the severity of the threat, for we are fighting a war that is unseen but to a few. We want to keep it that way, like Cancer Man on *The X-Files*, because if people knew, it would all fall apart.”

“What you’re saying is, you can’t help us,” Jeff said. “The only thing I don’t know is why you’re talking to us at all.”

“I didn’t say I couldn’t help. Just that I can’t help you *here*. Olga will understand.”

Jeff turned to Olga then, his eyes seeming to plead.

“Have you ever wondered what it would be like to live on another world?” she now

asked.

Understanding came like a flash of lightning.

XI

“This trader we’re going to meet,” Kira said. “He used to do a lot of catnapping.”

“Dozed off on the job?” Jeff asked.

“No, he stole *cats*. Domestic cats. They’re extremely valuable on human worlds – the Seeders never--”

“Seeders?”

“The people who brought your people to sundry worlds at sundry times over the past several millennia. The Galen at first, and then their surrogates.”

“Galen? Right.”

“Anyway, the point is, I had a run-in with Estis a few years back. Caught him red-handed. I could have dealt with him a lot more harshly than I did, so now he owes me. Luckily, he just checked in with me a few days ago. I’ve talked him around.”

* * *

It was a month since Jeff and Olga had met Kira at the forecastle. She had since kept them well hidden at her very secluded private estate. Now they were riding with her in a limousine with darkened windows – the same one that had borne them to the estate – en route to a remote southwestern Colorado town called Ouray.

He and Olga had had time to talk during their stay at Kira’s. There wasn’t much else *to* do, besides making love and walking around the grounds – going beyond the grounds was a no-no. Oh, and they could watch TV, including the conventions, one of them just a few miles away in Denver. Nothing very inspiring, and neither of them was going to be voting in November. They didn’t have any idea where they *would* be voting, assuming that their new home even had elections.

“What kind of a world would you *want* to live on?” he asked one day. “What would a good world be?”

“I used to have an easy answer, when I was little,” she said. “A Communist world.

Everyone living and working in harmony, 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.' A lot of us felt that way; Stalin was dead, but there was still the dream. We were going to make it real, we were going to make it right. And then..."

"Into the dustbin of history."

"Not right away. But that's where we were heading."

"And where are we heading now?"

"No place you or I want to go. What the Aureans want here is a global civil war, a war so terrible that people will welcome a global dictatorship. They won't realize, until too late, that the dictatorship is only a satrapy for the Empire. But after that, people will learn to accommodate it. Some, even, to love it."

"Must this be?"

"Kira doesn't think so, or she wouldn't be here. And as Lisa Matthews, she's doing what she can to make things better – not just big-name causes like AIDs, but smart drugs with fewer side-effects that other pharmaceutical companies won't touch because they'd work too well. She's also using cut-outs to introduce new energy technologies nobody here knows about -- and that couldn't get government funding because they don't have any lobbyists running interference for them. All while staying under the Aurean radar."

"So if people are healthier, and don't have to worry about global warming, they'll be better people?"

"They'll act better, at least, People are always at their worst when they're frightened. And that's when they start thinking that all the problems of the world are caused by other people who aren't like them. Everything would be fine if it weren't for the kikes or the niggers or the spics or the chinks – or the whites, for that matter. If it weren't for the queers or the sluts or the pigs. If it weren't for the Muslims or the fundamentalists or the secular humanists. If it weren't for the fat-cat capitalists or the lazy workers..."

"Will it be any better where we're going? And where *are* we going?"

"That's up to Kira. Whatever arrangements she can make. She may have a limited choice, but I trust her. She'll see us through."

"What kind of choices are there?"

"The thing you have to remember about the seeded worlds is that their populations are generally homogeneous. Things haven't worked out as well where the Seeders

planted different cultures, although there are a few exceptions – the Scribes have studied those, trying to understand what went right there when the others went wrong.”

“I trust Kira won’t send us to one of those.”

“On the other hand, the monocultural worlds can be very insular; boring, even. Or so I’m told.”

“I’ve been thinking about the kind of world I’d want to live on. Not some hellhole for sure. But not a utopia, either, where everything is about some Big Idea. Just a world of decent people, decent in the common everyday sense of the word. Like the best people you know. Willing to live and let live, and yet work together for goals that make ordinary common sense.”

“I couldn’t put it better.”

They let him write letters to family and friends, to be posted only after he left. It was painful, because he couldn’t tell them anything except that he’d found a safe place to live, that he was innocent of all the accusations against him, and that he was sorry he couldn’t see them again.

“You see how it is,” Kira had told him. “I *could* have intervened on your behalf. But then my contacts in Washington would have wanted to know *why*. And I couldn’t have told them. Nothing that related to my mission here. As for the people who make decisions about terrorism, they never admit any mistakes. It took an Act of Congress to get Nelson Mandela off the terrorist list, and you’re not Nelson Mandela. So your only choices are to be gone or be dead.”

Jeff and Olga were watching CNN one day when there was a brief item about Tyler Reynolds being shot to death in an apparent robbery. That led Olga to Google the names of Eric and Derek Sutphin – “The Tweedles,” she explained. They had both been killed when their car went over a cliff.

“Guess they’re tying up loose ends,” she said.

“That’s an odd way of putting it.”

There came the day they had been waiting for, when the alien ship contacted Kira on a secure channel. They set the time and the place for a meeting.

The ship was cloaked, of course. It was only a shimmer here in the desert outside Ouray. It could have been a heat mirage, for all anyone could tell. But the creatures who stepped out of it were no mirage.

They were very big and very red, these Scalantrans. They spoke in low, rumbling voices.

Male and female they were; at least Jeff surmised that from the fact that one of them looked pregnant.

“Are we going to have a deal?” rumbled the male, whose name Kira had given as Sol Estis.

“As long as you’re not carrying. Cats, that is.”

“Perish the thought,” boomed Sol. “I’ve mended my ways. I’m an honest trader. I buy here only from e-Bay. The sellers are satisfied, and I am satisfied, knowing that I can get ten times or more the price for certain artifacts on certain worlds.”

Kira turned to the female, who was presumably Sol’s mate.

“You wouldn’t be hiding a kitten in your tlax, would you?” Kira asked.

The female said nothing, but the red head of a Scalantran infant popped out.

“Just checking,” Kira said.

Marsupial, Jeff was thinking. Though they’d have another word for it – or maybe none, if all the fauna were marsupial where they came from.

A third figure emerged from the ship. Very human. Very dark-skinned.

“Boris Eristratov,” Sol introduced him. “My adopt. Honorary Scalantran.”

“You’re a reject,” Kira taunted him. “You couldn’t even adopt an alley cat.”

“There you go again with the kitty business. Actually, I’m back in the League’s good graces. I’m going to be manning probe ships. And my Rooski droog will be of great help. He is very enterprising.”

“Mwi khoroshiye druzya,” Boris chimed in. “*Ochen khoroshiye.*”

“*Ochen khoroshiye pokhititeli,*” Olga remarked.

“Who are you to call us thieves?” Boris retorted. “Are you one of my countrymen?”

Then, taking a closer look at Olga, he switched to Russian.

“A vam nnavitsya lezhat so mnoi?” [Would you like to lie with me?] the leering trader propositioned her.

“Tolko v vashikh snovideniyakh!” [Only in your dreams] she brushed him off.

“Prosto hotiyel ubeditsya.” [Just checking]

“What was that all about,” Jeff asked a moment later.

“A joke. In poor taste.”

When the banter was over, Kira entered the ship with Sol and his companions. They emerged 15 minutes later.

“Kelsor 7,” Kira announced.

“She drives a hard bargain,” Sol boomed.

“It’s a strange world, devoted to research and exploration,” Kira continued. “Velor has strained relations with the Kelsorians just now, for reasons you wouldn’t appreciate. But the Scalantrans have good relations with them. They have good relations everywhere, isn’t that so?”

“Commerce knows no boundaries,” Sol affirmed.

“But is this a good world we’re going to?” Jeff wondered.

“Not *too* good,” Kira advised. “Very good worlds are just as tiresome as very good people. But it’s a good world for people with your talents. Only, you’ll need to learn a lot on the way – just for starters, their computers are based on a whole different technology from the ones you’re used to. You’ll have to catch up on a lot of science. And that’s after getting deepteach on the language.”

“Deepteach?” Jeff wondered.

“Like in *Brave New World*. The whole vocabulary and grammar. But you’ll have to practice speaking, and do a lot of reading, to activate them.”

“Sounds like it’ll take a while.”

“Fortunately, it’s a long trip; you’ll have to change ships along the way, but Sol will have a warrant good for your passage.”

“We’ll see other worlds on the way?” Olga asked eagerly. “Worlds I’ve only heard about?”

“Assuredly. And if you qualify for Kelsor’s research ships, you may see worlds that no one has seen before.”

“What about the people who live there,” Olga teased. “*They* must have seen them.”

“Just a figure of speech. Like on *Star Trek*.”

“When they changed it from ‘no man’ to ‘no one,’ didn’t anybody notice they were going from sexism to speciesism?”

“I suppose not,” Kira said. “But you’ve got the right attitude. It will serve you well. But now it’s time to say farewell. We’ll never see each other again, but I’ll never forget you.”

“Nor we you,” said Olga, as Jeff nodded in agreement.

They all embraced each other then, as people on Earth and countless other worlds do on such occasions. They shed tears of sadness and joy, and couldn’t say which afterwards were which.

Jeff and Olga followed Sol into the ship, turning to wave goodbye to Kira.

Their rescue was over. Their journey had begun.